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Resilience and recovery found at the WTB

Commentary by Sgt. First Class Nichole Bonham



[Sgt. 1st Class Bonham was assigned to Fort Carson's Warrior Transition Battalion for 10 months during her medical treatment and recovery. She then returned to service and is currently assigned to the Joint Forces Headquarters – Utah Army National Guard where she serves as the state tuition assistance manager.]

People have low times in their lives. It just happens. Maybe without them we wouldn't fully appreciate the good times – but believing that doesn't always make those lows feel any easier to bear. What does help is reaching out, getting help, and discovering you're not alone.

The team at the Fort Carson Warrior Transition Battalion was there for me. My family and friends were all there for me. I'm back on my feet now and I'm discovering that, after my stumble, I'm stronger, more determined, and more focused than I have been in a long time

When I first came to the Warrior Transition Battalion in October of 2014 I was barely able to walk without a cane because of a degenerative joint disease. I was positive that having both my hips replaced would mean

then end of my military career. And, I was just this side of terrified about finding a civilian job that would come close to the pay I was making as a sergeant first class. I had never gotten a degree and I had no clue how my military background might translate to a regular job.

Add to that my weight gain, as I've struggled with weight my entire military career. But it had never gotten as bad as it did in the year prior to my transfer to the WTB. Maybe this can be explained away by my inability to workout. But really, it was a resilience issue. I've always described myself as an emotional eater – I eat when I'm stressed, when I'm sad, or even when I'm just bored. I never really built up alternate means of dealing with stress and depression.

That's the stumble I referred to above. My weight got bad enough that I was flagged for it, and it had been less than twelve months since the last flag I had been on. I had twenty years in the reserves, twelve of them active guard reserve, and I almost threw it all away because I didn't know how to deal with my lowest moments in a non-destructive way.

That's where I was when I came to the WTB's Community Care Unit – not just drained from my physical condition, but also feeling demoralized, like I wasn't even sure I deserved all the time and attention I was getting from the Fort Carson team. So I resolved to make sure I did deserve it and I threw myself into the program.

I went to all my appointments, I listened to every word my physical therapist said, I went back to school full-time and I worked thirty hours a week at an internship with the DEA that was set up through the Operation Warfighter Program.

The CCU was designed for Soldiers like me who have the resources and support network in their hometown. I was immensely grateful as it was a huge benefit to me and my family that I was able to recover from home.

But I wasn't on my own in Utah, the CCU cadre came out to Salt Lake City two or three times to ensure I had the physical therapy resources I needed, like a pool at my local community center. I might have been in a different state but there was always someone at the CCU to talk to if I needed them.

I put serious thought and effort into every self-assessment the unit gave me and every activity my squad leader recommended. But my favorite activity, the one I got the most out of and that will have the most long-term effect on my life, was goal setting.

I've had goals before, plans on what I want to accomplish, but I never realized how big a difference it would make to write them down, break them into sub-goals and set a timeline. Or how much could be accomplished if you set goals in all the different facets of your life. You can work on them all at the same time as long as you stay realistic.

But all that aside, the best part is the way the WTB handles their part of the deal. They weren't enforcers, holding my feet to the fire if I didn't meet a goal. Instead, they were there to support me, to show me how to scale down my ideas, make them more realistic. They kept me on task by reminding me that these goals weren't important because someone else said so, but because they were what I wanted to do.

Ultimately, my surgeries didn't lead to the end of my career. And, because of my weekly physical therapist visits and daily exercises the cane is gone and I am walking more comfortably than I have in more than four years.

After ten months with the WTB my doctors decided I was fit for duty, but neither I nor my state had expected me to return to duty – so there was no slot waiting for me. The WTB helped me coordinate with my state's chain of command and now I'm back at my AGR position with the Utah National Guard.

I will be forever grateful for the way the CCU team helped me both with my physical recovery and with relearning how to take back control of my life. I plan to do them proud and take those lessons I've learned on how to build, support, and sustain a more resilient Soldier, a more resilient me, back to my family and my unit.